

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 15673

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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: MARR, IT

SUBJECT: PROPOSED CHANGE IN ROTATION POLICY 509TH BATTALION, VICENZA

1. THE EMBASSY HAS LEARNED THAT PRESUMABLY AS AN EXTENSION OF A PLAN TO DEPLOY TWO AIRBORNE BRIGADES TO GERMANY ON A SEMI-ANNUAL BASIS, THE DEPARTMENT OF ARMY PROPOSES TO CONVERT THE 509TH BATTALION AT CAMP EDERLE, VICENZA TO A SIX-MONTH UNACCOMPANIED ROTATIONAL SCHEDULE. AT PRESENT, 509TH PERSONNEL ARE ASSIGNED TO THREE-YEAR TOURS OF DUTY AND ARE ACCOMPANIED BY DEPENDENTS. THIS ALTERATION OF THE CHARACTER OF THE 509TH WILL IN THE EMBASSY'S VIEW HAVE SERIOUS REPERCUSSIONS IN THE VICENZA AREA AND COULD IMPACT ADVERSELY ON THE ENTIRE U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE IN ITALY.

2. DEPLOYMENT OF THE 509TH (A DESIGNATED ELEMENT OF ACE MOBILE FORCE) WAS CARRIED OUT IN 1973 ON A LOW KEY PHASED BASIS IN DEFERENCE TO THE SENSIBILITIES OF THE GOI. WHEN THE FINAL INCREMENT ARRIVED IN OCTOBER 1973, HOWEVER, IT WAS SPECULATED IN THE PRESS THAT THE MOVEMENT WAS RELATED TO U.S. PLANNING FOR INTERVENTION IN MIDDLE EAST. UNDER THE BEST OF CIRCUMSTANCES, DEPLOYING 1200 AIRBORNE TROOPS TO ITALY EVERY SIX MONTHS WOULD BE AN EVEN MORE HIGHLY VISIBLE EXERCISE THAT WOULD SUBJECT THE ENTIRE U.S. PRESENCE IN ITALY TO A SEMI-ANNUAL RE-EXAMINATION OF OUR INTENTIONS. THE UNFRIENDLY PRESS WOULD USE THESE MOVEMENTS AS A CONVENIENT AND FREQUENT PRETEXT TO KEEP THE ISSUES OF THE RISKS AND BURDENS OF ITALY'S ALLIANCE CONNECTION BEFORE THE PUBLIC.

3. THE U.S. MILITARY/COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN THE VICENZA AREA

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ARE NOW EXCELLENT. TRANSFORMING THE 509TH INTO AN UNACCOMPANIED

ROTATIONAL UNIT WILL INEVITABLY ADVERSELY AFFECT THOSE RELATIONS. THE LOCAL ECONOMY WILL BE UNAVOIDABLY DEPRESSED BY THE LOSS OF HOUSING RENTALS AND THE ABSENCE OF 509TH FAMILY UNITS THAT NOW CONTRIBUTE SUBSTANTIALLY TO THE RETAIL TRADE. THE PRESENCE OF 1299 UNACCOMPANIED SHORT-TIME TROOPS WILL UNQUESTIONABLY LEAD TO AN INCREASE IN PROBLEMS OF DISCIPLINE AND MORALE ON BASE AND TO A SURGE OF OFF-BASE INCIDENTS INVOLVING LOCAL CITIZENS AND POSSIBLE VIOLATIONS OF ITALIAN LAW.

4. THE GOI HAS MADE IT CLEAR THAT ANY SUBSTANTIAL QUANTITATIVE OR QUALITATIVE ALTERATION OF THE U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE IN ITALY WOULD NOT BE WELCOME. ALTHOUGH WE HAVE NOT OF COURSE DISCUSSED THE PROPOSED CHANGE IN THE 509TH DEPLOYMENT POLICY WITH THE GOI, WE CAN CONFIDENTLY EXPECT THAT THE SAME PROBLEMS MENTIONED IN PARAS 2 AND 3 WOULD BE RAISED AS WELL AS OTHER SERIOUS IMPEDIMENTS WE HAVE NOT YET IDENTIFIED. WE COULD NATURALLY ARGUE THAT THE PROPOSAL DOES NOT INVOLVE A CHANGE IN NUMBERS (INDEED, IN ABSOLUTE TERMS, IT WOULD MEAN A REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF AMERICANS AT VICENZA). BUT WE CANNOT DENY IT TO BE A SUBSTANTIAL AND VISIBLE QUALITATIVE CHANGE THAT COULD LEAD TO CONTENTION IN AN AREA OF A RELATIVELY HEAVY U.S. PRESENCE THAT NOW DRAWS LITTLE OR NO FIRE FROM OUR OR THE GOI'S CRITICS. SHOULD VICENZA BECOME THE FOCUS OF CENSURE FROM THE GOI'S ADVERSARIES, WE BELIEVE IT HIGHLY LIKELY THAT OTHER U.S. MILITARY EFFORTS IN ITALY WOULD BE SET BACK (THE STILL FLIMSY OPERATION AT IA MADDALENA, FOR EXAMPLE), OR SUBJECTED TO LIMITATIONS WE WOULD FIND UNCOMFORTABLE AT THE LEAST (SUCH AS AT SIGONELLA OR NAPLES). VICENZA IS A MAJOR INSTALLATION WITHIN THE BILATERAL INFRASTRUCTURE AGREEMENT FRAMEWORK. ANY CHANGE THERE THAT WOULD BE CONSIDERED SUBSTANTIAL BY THE ITALIANS WOULD LIKELY OPEN UP OTHER BIA ISSUES WHERE OUR POSITION IS TENUOUS AT BEST.

5. THE EMBASSY STRONGLY URGES THAT NO ACTION BE TAKEN TO INITIATE THIS CHANGE IN THE CHARACTER OF THE MANNING OF THE 509TH (OR EVEN CONTINGENCY PLANNING THAT COULD BE DISCOVERED BY THE ITALIANS) UNTIL THERE HAS BEEN PRIOR NOTIFICATION TO THE GOI. MORE FUNDAMENTALLY, THE EMBASSY WOULD WELCOME ANY ACTION THE DEPARTMENT MIGHT TAKE TO FORESTALL THE CHANGE. VOLPE

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